

## MIDLANDS VOICES

# Bolster higher education, bolster Nebraska's future

By JAMES B. MILLIKEN

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A recent report issued by the College Board shows that the United States has fallen from first to 12th in the world in the percentage of adults ages 25-34 with postsecondary degrees. Only about 40 percent of young Americans have earned an associate's, bachelor's or advanced degree — well behind Canada, which leads the world with 56 percent, and also lagging behind Korea, Japan, Germany and other nations.

Why should this concern us? Because today, more than any time in our history, it is understood that a college-educated work force is an essential ingredient for a competitive economy.

The returns from a college education, to the individual and to society, are immense. An earlier College Board report, "Education Pays," demonstrates the positive impact of educational attainment. Compared with high school graduates, individuals with a bachelor's degree:

>> Earn nearly \$20,000 per year more.

>> Have significantly lower unemployment rates, especially among African-Americans.

>> Rely far less on public assistance.

>> Enjoy better health.

>> Are more likely to vote, volunteer and participate in their community.

>> Have children who have better cognitive skills as preschoolers and a greater likelihood of going on to college after high school.

Regaining our competitive advantage in higher education is an obvious national priority. That's why the president has outlined a strategy to help the

United States regain its leadership position.

In addition, the National Governors Association, of which Gov. Dave Heineman is the new vice chairman, just announced that its primary initiative for next year focuses on college completion. It's called "Complete to Compete."

Nebraska's higher education challenges mirror the nation's. While Nebraska ranks second in the nation in high school graduation rates, it is 18th in college-going rate, with fewer than 65 percent of high school graduates going on to college. We are below the national average in overall educational attainment, with just under 40 percent of Nebraskans holding an associate's degree or higher and only 27 percent having a bachelor's degree or higher.

One additional statistic is especially compelling. A new report from Georgetown University assessing the level of education required to fill new jobs through 2018 ranks Nebraska seventh in the nation in the percentage of jobs (66 percent) that will require postsecondary education.

Most leaders, including those in Nebraska, recognize that the standard of competitiveness for a region or nation is no longer a high school education but some level of postsecondary completion.

Nebraska's P-16 Commission, chaired by the governor, has advanced an agenda that begins with a strong public school curricula and concludes with timely completion of college. And the NU Board of Regents has adopted strategic priorities with accountability measures regarding access, affordability, enrollment growth and timely degree completion.

Notwithstanding these priorities, Nebraska has historically treated postsecondary educa-

tion as a discretionary expenditure in the state's budget. Higher education funding in Nebraska has grown much less rapidly over the past decades than have other state priorities or even the growth rate of all of state government.

I readily acknowledge that there are other very worthy state priorities, but I question whether Nebraska can afford to make budget decisions that limit access to higher education and its personal and societal benefits.

Nebraska's fiscal condition has required state agencies to absorb reductions, and the University of Nebraska has been willing to do its part, making \$58 million in budget cuts and reallocations over the last decade, with an additional \$10 million this year. We provided no funds for salary increases this year and have processes in place for further increasing efficiencies and reducing expenditures over the next two years.

As we consider further funding reductions for the state's priorities, however, we should consider the impact on the long-term prospects for Nebraskans and our economy.

It is in this context that I believe the Legislature and governor should make spending decisions for the state's budget. The next few years will be difficult and will provide a test of our stated commitment to education and the future of Nebraska.

At a time when the rest of the world has recognized the advantages the United States has enjoyed largely because of higher education and is pulling ahead of us in our own game, we must recommit ourselves to providing affordable access and timely completion of a college education.